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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the general education curriculum in six New England institutions who had received funding from foundations or government agencies to assist them in reforming such curricula. It is an examination of the importance of outside funds in the process of designing and implementing major changes in the general education curriculum. It explores when outside funds are most helpful and how institutions and funding agencies can improve the change process. Results of the site visits indicate that a careful infusion of outside money in the early stages of design can have a beneficial effect on the outcome. However, institutions are naturally more skillful at designing change than executing it, therefore, they and the funding agencies need to focus more of their energy on better implementation practice. The essay suggests that a critical function before beginning any curricular change is to ensure that: (1) the goals and change process are realistic and sensitive to the culture of the campus; (2) they are compatible with the institution's environment; (3) they are capable of being supported by faculty and key administrators; (4) the funding is adequate; and (5) the faculty is prepared for the changes. Contains three references. (GLR)

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Working Paper #9

The Buck Stops Here: Outside Grants and the General Education Curriculum Change Process

Sandra Kanter

December 1991

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"The Buck Stops Here: Outside Grants and the General Education Curriculum Change Process" describes the process of general education curriculum change in six New England institutions. All had received funding from foundations or government agencies to assist them in reforming their general education curricula. The essay is an examination of the importance of outside funds in the process of designing and implementing major changes in the general education curriculum. It explores when outside funds are most helpful and how institutions and funding agencies can improve the change process.

The Buck Stops Here:

Outside Grants and the General Education Curriculum Change Process

Sandra Kanter

Background

In the first two years of a research project sponsored by the Exxon Education Foundation, members of a research team reviewed the general education curricula of over seventy doctorate-granting, comprehensive and less selective liberal arts institutions located in New England. In addition to a telephone survey, we visited eight sites which had tried to implement significant revisions in their general education curricula. With the completion of the eight field reports, it is now possible to consider the importance of outside funding in the process of designing and implementing major changes in the general education curriculum. The names of the institutions and some identifying details about them have been altered for the purposes of this essay.

Six of the eight institutions we visited received outside funding, usually to help them design the curriculum. The amount of money awarded these institutions was often substantial. In fact, half of the institutions received repeated funding from the same source. The presence of an outside grant gave institutions funds to free faculty from their daily chores to work on curriculum changes. There was also a symbolic message that came with the award. It said that an institution had to take seriously all the promises to innovate made in the grant application. No matter what problems confronted the institution, it had an obligation to "produce results."

The Powerful Lure of Money

The availability of grant money to an administrator or faculty member in an institution with little discretionary money can be a powerful lure. In most cases, the search for funds in the institutions we studied came on the heels of a decision to change the general education curriculum. Either campus opinion had already formed in the direction of change or campus leaders had made a commitment to reform and were actively working "behind the scenes" to move campus opinion in their direction when a decision was made to seek outside funds. Less frequently, the availability of outside funds became itself the catalyst for change. When this happened, the decision to commit the campus to a particular change, or just to change in general, came from the desire to obtain discretionary outside funds. The College of Reflection is an example of the latter situation.

The college, a small, private sectarian institution, occupies over 60 acres in an historic district in Boston, Massachusetts. Faculty opinion provided the initial impetus for change. In the 1970s, increasingly unhappy with the distribution system, the faculty at the College of Reflection organized a task force to review the general education curriculum. As part of this process, the College applied for and received a small grant from a federal agency to send three faculty members to a conference on general education. The grant also paid for a consultant to visit the campus to discuss ways to change general education.

Excited about what they learned at the sessions and from the consultant, a group of faculty members decided to apply to a federal agency for funds to put in place an innovative pilot program on general education for freshmen. By all accounts, this decision had the support of a majority of faculty and key administrators. The proposal

writers received a stream of congratulations when the agency awarded the College of Reflection an ample budget to try out the new program over a two year period. Towards the end of the second year, a group of faculty, many of whom were instrumental in getting the pilot program underway, decided to apply to the original source once again for funds to expand the freshman program into a fully integrated general education program. The department's rules required that the design for the new program be approved by the appropriate campus governance bodies prior to the submission of the proposal.

Like the freshman program, the four year proposal was very innovative in focusing on skills, interdisciplinary learning, and team-teaching. But not everybody on the faculty who supported the freshman program liked the idea of expanding it into a four year program. Those who opposed the idea were troubled by a lack of traditional content and feared that this more extensive change would brand the college as radical and outside the mainstream of traditional liberal arts institutions.

The supporters of the proposal refused to compromise the design to appease critics. To do so would threaten the chances of getting the grant: the federal agency would fund the program if it remained unique, an example for other institutions interested in new solutions. Although deeply divided about the proposal, a number of faculty members were reluctant to turn their backs on a major grant and joined with the supporters of the change in approving the proposal. The agency awarded the College more than $200,000 to implement its plan.

Perhaps because of the mixed feelings that the new program engendered, the College decided to have two general education tracks: the old distribution system and the grant-funded program called *New Ways of Learning*. Students could fulfill their general education requirements by doing either program.

The *New Ways* program remained only as long as outside funds were available to finance it. When the funding ended, the president appointed a committee to make the general education curriculum less costly. It is obvious from interviews that the president also wanted a program that was less unusual and had support from an influential group of faculty.

The faculty committee produced a hybrid between a distribution system and the more innovative grant-funded curriculum. As happens in any compromise, the design was rough around the edges and lacked the cohesion of a single vision. But even the faculty who supported *New Ways of Learning* were tired of the strife over the new curriculum. With the exception of a few dissenters, everyone agreed to the compromise.

Four years after being first implemented, the compromise remains virtually unchanged. Long-time faculty who were around for much of the earlier turmoil continue to support the changes. But newer faculty members are less sympathetic to the flaws in the design and many of them prefer a straightforward distribution system. With high faculty turnover over the last few years, there has been a noticeable waning of support for this general education curriculum.

An Example of A Misguided Effort

The story of our second site, Urban University, cannot be attributed simply to a clash between the desire on the part of some to win outside funds and campus culture. Even before grants came into the picture, key administrators on the campus supported major changes in the general education curriculum. But, as at the College of Reflection, what was promised in the grant application was ambitious, lofty and at odds with campus

views. The fact that the College of Reflection had some financial problems certainly helped to sell a controversial plan for general education. Urban University, however, was a campus struggling to cope with major financial cutbacks. In the end, much of what was promised in Urban's grant applications never materialized as educational visions took a back seat to the faculty's and administrators' unwillingness to take risks in uncertain times.

Urban University is a private, non-sectarian comprehensive university founded in 1927. The 1960s and 1970s were heady times for the university. Enrollments were growing, especially in the liberal arts. During this period, the administration decided to embark on an ambitious program of investment in new plant and equipment in order to make the university a major regional presence.

Problems with this strategy began to emerge by the mid-1970s. By then, other regional institutions had become more competitive, student enrollments were declining, and the liberal arts program was no longer popular with the students who remained. The Board appointed a new president they hoped could deal with the changing conditions.

The president wanted the University faculty to redesign their general education curriculum. His ideal was the core curriculum at St. Johns College. He thought that a core curriculum would be less costly to operate, would attract students and would provide them with a better education than the current curriculum.

The university received a grant from a major private foundation to establish a permanent fund, the proceeds of which were to be used to foster humanities education on the campus. Because of the extremely tight budget, the administration decided to use most of the interest income from the grant to pay the salaries of several faculty members already on campus. A small portion, however, went to a group of faculty to attend a summer workshop on liberal education sponsored by the Danforth Foundation.

Inspired by the workshop experience, several of the faculty members returned to campus and worked with others to propose a core curriculum. But by the time they were ready to present their curriculum plan, financial conditions had worsened and most of the faculty were too preoccupied with the situation to consider making changes in the curriculum.

Several years later, the administration tried again to revise the general education curriculum. By this time, the president and other members of his administration had given up on the idea of a strict core curriculum. Instead, the provost encouraged the faculty to adopt a curriculum plan that featured interdisciplinary courses. He appointed a faculty committee to come up with a design. They proposed a three-stage general education program: two required freshman skills courses, two required interdisciplinary courses in each of four areas of study, and a senior seminar.

During this period, the administration received a second grant from the same foundation to develop interdisciplinary general education courses. But the unstable economic environment at the university made the faculty fearful that limiting students' options would result in fewer faculty positions; they substituted a distribution requirement for the interdisciplinary courses in the final version of the curriculum. The administration tried one more time: in the early 1980s, the provost received funds, this time from a federal agency, to design additional interdisciplinary courses. By now, the faculty had settled into their routines and were even more reluctant to alter the program.

The story is not entirely bleak. The senior seminar, which focuses on interdisciplinary themes that change periodically, has lived up to almost everyone's expectations and is a source of pride to people who teach in the general education program. Some people we interviewed also believed that, given the instability in the

economic climate of the university, faculty were too preoccupied to make the changes in their teaching that would be expected in either a core program or an interdisciplinary program. In their view, the situation called for a more conservative model of change.

Success in the Design Process

We found that outside funding agencies were most successful when financing turning point events early in the curriculum change process. To work, campus leaders had to be willing to take an active role in knitting the results of these events into the fabric of the change process. Jury State is perhaps the most interesting example of this type of strategy. It is the story of how a limited amount of outside funds, used at the right time and in the right way, had a far-reaching impact on the eventual design of general education curriculum.

Jury State is a small, public college located in the Northeast corner of New England. In the late 1970s, a confluence of events and circumstances pushed the campus to reconsider its general education curriculum. The college was losing enrollment and the faculty feared that Jury State was developing a reputation as a school for poorly prepared students. Several professional degree programs had just been established and there were questions about what the liberal arts requirements should be for students in the professional degree programs.

In the early 1980's, the college chose as its new academic dean a person who had extensive experience in designing interdisciplinary general education curricula. Not surprisingly, the new dean wanted Jury State to have an interdisciplinary general education curriculum.

The dean recruited influential senior faculty to help him write a grant proposal for the development and support of team-taught interdisciplinary courses. The grant application was successful and he then asked a small number of faculty, including some who did not write the proposal, to participate in the design activities. For their efforts, they received summer stipends and course releases.

While all of this was going on, a group of faculty were designing a new general education curriculum. By the time the committee was ready to develop an actual proposal, the new interdisciplinary courses were already a part of the regular course schedule. The faculty who taught them were very enthusiastic. Their experiences, combined with the enthusiasm of the dean, convinced the committee to make interdisciplinary education a hallmark of the college's new general education curriculum.

In another successful change process, this one more accidental than intended, outside funding at the initial stages of curriculum change was the vehicle for overcoming organizational fragmentation. Western University, located in a suburb of a major New England city, has eight colleges offering instruction to more than 5,500 full-time and part-time undergraduates and almost 1900 graduates. The colleges are fiercely independent, with their own curricula and academic standards.

The university's effort to institute a new general education curriculum originated with the receipt of a three-year grant from a prominent private foundation to develop a new general education program for the College of Arts and Sciences. The members of the Arts and Sciences faculty committee undertaking the work of the grant concluded that it did not make sense for each college to have its own general education requirements. Instead of recommending a curriculum for their college, committee members proposed that the University adopt a general education curriculum for the entire campus.

The provost never liked the idea of separate general education requirements, so he was delighted that a faculty committee from the College of Arts and Sciences had called for a university-wide program. It gave him the credibility to appoint a university committee on general education. The committee proposed that all baccalaureate students be required to take a small number of courses from five areas of study. One year later, the university governance bodies approved the proposal.

Grants and the Implementation Process

Institutions focused most of their energies on designing curriculum. Little attention was given to what might be needed to implement the new plan. Funds for implementation were usually inconsequential, and the responsibility to operate the curriculum dispersed and unclear.

We found only one institution that had received grant monies for the purpose of helping faculty prepare for the changes. This institution also received funding very early in the process, when faculty complaints about the existing general education curriculum were just beginning to emerge. In addition, just one institution had received outside funding to formally evaluate the effectiveness of their changes.

New England University, an institution of higher learning located in a large urban community, enrolls approximately 10,000 ethnically and racially diverse undergraduates. It offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in the liberal arts and sciences as well as in a variety of vocational fields.

Initially, there were three liberal arts colleges at New England University, each with a different conception of education and its own general education curriculum. During

the early 1970s, faculty in the three colleges increasingly believed that their distribution systems were too loose and needed reform. Consequently, the university secured funding from a well-known national foundation to send selected faculty to a week-long seminar on designing core curriculum.

The issue took on new prominence during the late 1970s when, for budgetary reasons, the three colleges were forced to merge and become the College of Arts and Sciences with one general education curriculum. A committee then met and designed an innovative general education curriculum which included a mixture of distribution requirements and core courses. Few other institutions of this size and complexity had attempted to design required core courses. The faculty at the new College of Arts and Sciences were both excited and anxious about the proposal.

While the plan slowly made its way through the governance system, the new dean at the College of Arts and Sciences was busy seeking outside funds for faculty development. His plans were ambitious and both a private foundation and, later, a governmental agency agreed to back them.

The grants supported a long list of activities. What mattered most to participating faculty was that they were given a one semester course release to work on their revised syllabi. Frequent seminars and colloquia were also run for and by faculty who taught the core courses. Long-time faculty at New England recall these early seminars, complete with wine and cheese and day-long retreats, as wonderful times when they had a chance to get to know one another and collaborate on teaching projects.

The dean was happy to sponsor these faculty development activities as long as outside funds were available. But pressed by the demands of departments and a growing remedial program, he decided not to use internal funds to continue the activities

once the grant ended. Faculty thought the cutbacks symbolized a lack of administrative support for general education and were angered by the decision. The good-will that the activities engendered vanished with the funds.

By the mid-1980's, faculty development activities continued as informal afternoon workshops held once a semester. By all reports, they were not well attended or very effective. Likewise, the design of the original general education program proved to be expensive to implement and, over the years, it has also been simplified to make it more cost-effective. Authority for implementing the general education curriculum has never been very clear, and students and faculty seem to be equally critical of the value of the current array of general education courses and requirements.

The last example has a more hopeful outcome. Manchester State College, a rural comprehensive college, had one of the most successful design and implementation processes that we encountered. We found three important ingredients in the process, including a high degree of cooperation between the administration and faculty, strong leadership displayed by the faculty, and extensive support given the faculty by the administration to develop and implement the program. That support included grants to develop syllabi, travel monies, clerical and administrative support, and release time for members of the design committee. It is important to note that these funds all came from internal budgets.

The college has been awarded a substantial grant from the state educational office to evaluate its general education program. While the evaluation process had not begun when we visited Manchester State, discussions with faculty and administrators indicate that they have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about what they want and have a well-designed assessment process.

Some Lessons Learned

The institutions we studied had a myriad of difficulties, most of them related to and sometimes caused by a lack of resources. Administrators wrestled with problems that included declining enrollments, poor student skills, low faculty morale and inadequate physical facilities. The greatest resource on these campuses was not money but the attention of faculty and staff.

The cost of curriculum reform was high. Putting in place a new curriculum was a very labor intensive activity for faculty and, as one administrator told us, there are only so many times that a campus can go to the "faculty well." Success brought new pride and energy to a campus. When the endeavor failed, a part of the faculty's spirit and enthusiasm was lost.

Most of the institutions we visited had already taken steps to change their general education curriculum when they decided to seek outside funds to support the change process. Half of the sites received multiple grants from the same source. Whatever the size of the grants, there was always a good faith effort to fulfill the promises made in the grant proposals.

Sometimes, as in the case of Jury State College and Western University, the results were very positive. As we have seen, however, some institutions made ill-advised or overly ambitious promises. Urban University is a good example of an institution which had institution-threatening problems and never should have embarked on such a challenging journey.

When outside monies were available, they usually subsidized the process of designing the new curricula rather than implementing them. Whether this was because

foundations and government agencies preferred to fund the design of new curricula or whether institutions chose to seek funds for this purpose is unclear. With rare exceptions, however, the attention the campus paid to the general education curriculum waned when the design was completed and outside resources were depleted. Significantly fewer resources and much less thought went into implementation than into design.

New England University was the only campus that obtained outside funds to help faculty prepare for the changes in the curriculum. But even there, the celebration of design has given way to the indifference of implementation. Once the external funds were gone, administrators on the campus substantially reduced faculty development activities.

Can the experiences at these sites teach us anything about how to improve the curriculum change process? We start with a note of cautious optimism. Colleges and universities are reluctant innovators. When faced with financial or other forms of instability, the faculty's proclivity for cautious change can easily turn into hardened opposition to even the smallest revisions in the curriculum. This happened in a few of the campuses we visited. In spite of their many problems, however, most of the institutions were able to improve their general education curriculum and a small number achieved major curriculum reforms.

The overall results of their experiences, however, were quite mixed, suggesting that some things could be done to improve the change process. We offer two recommendations for institutions contemplating changes in their general education curriculum. The remaining suggestion is directed to funding agencies.

Working Paper #9: The Buck Stops Here

(1) Institutions should take a long, hard look at their strengths and limitations before embarking on major reform.

Major general education reform can be accomplished. As we have seen in our site visits, the results of a successful change process can be exhilarating. But before attempting this journey, campuses need to be aware of the psychological as well as the financial costs such an effort entails. Will the results be worth it? At best, outside monies can only support a part of the process. Are institutions willing or able to invest large amounts of their own time and money to make change successful?

Institutions that decide against making major changes do not have to give up on the idea of improving their general education curriculum. Instead, they might decide to limit their search to reforms in teaching, advising or curriculum initiatives that have an important impact on students' learning but do not require massive effort to implement.

Some struggling institutions might be better off if they decided to ignore altogether, or at least temporarily, the problems in their general education curriculum in order to devote more attention to other, more pressing problems. This is not easy to do: general education is currently a "hot" topic in the national arena and grants are available for experimenting with new designs. Many well-meaning people also fall into the trap of thinking that general education is the campus "garbage can" (all student, fiscal and staffing problems are attributed to a poor general education program). But most general education changes have a limited ripple effect and institutional leaders should not count on general education reform to solve all their problems.

(2) Institutions that decide to make changes in their general education curriculum must devote more attention and resources to good implementation practices.

If we have learned anything over the last few years, it is that implementation is the weak link in the curriculum change process; even the best designed general education needs to be properly incorporated into the curriculum. We talked about the value of faculty development activities to prepare faculty for changes in the curriculum. Good implementation practice also includes preparing staff and students for the changes, active faculty participation in decision-making, sufficient and stable resources, visible leadership support and clearly defined lines of authority, and a plan for assessing the program.

(3) Funding agencies need to do a better job of assessing when their attention will be helpful and positive and when it will not be.

It is on resource-poor campuses that most of our students will be educated and where the greatest challenges to our society lie. Foundations and other funding agencies must support their efforts. In doing so, funders need to keep in mind that such institutions are constantly walking a financial tightrope and develop guidelines that are sensitive to their situations.

What information should they be seeking? They might want to explore the motivation for applying for the grant. The chances of achieving the stated objectives are much better if the proposal is part of an ongoing process of change. They might also weigh the support (or likely support) of the faculty and key academic leaders. They

should ask if the goals of a proposal and change process are realistic and sensitive to the culture on the campus. Are they compatible with the institution's environment? Most importantly, they should look at the plans for implementing the design. Are they carefully thought out and realistic? Are they supported by the faculty and key administrators? Are the funds sufficient? Will faculty be adequately prepared for the changes? Does the institution intend to evaluate the changes?

As we have found in our site visits, there is no single answer to these questions. One way to get this information is to spend time on campuses, meeting students and talking to faculty and staff, especially those who are not boosters of change. Foundation representatives should speak with those who will be in charge of administering the changes. Funding officers would also be well advised to examine campus budgets carefully and to assess the commitment of administrators who are in leadership positions or have the authority to allocate resources on campus.

Conclusion

Resource poor institutions contemplating major changes in their general education curriculum will continue to seek funds from outside agencies to support the process of change. If the past is a good indicator of the future, most of the grant money will be used to subsidize the process of designing curriculum. Our research indicates that a careful infusion of outside money in the early stages of design can have a beneficial effect on the outcome. But institutions are naturally more skillful at designing change than executing it. They and funding agencies need to focus more of their energy on better implementation practice. This is the key that will ultimately open the door to a successful change process.

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